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ABSTRACT

The three major factors affecting the future of the nation's cities are: (1) lack of housing demand due to population migration; (2) the conflict between suburban growth and city restoration; and (3) the combination of racially segregated housing markets, obsolescence of existing buildings, and the high cost structure of both public sector and private sector operations in older cities. Many large older cities in the Northeast and Midwest are experiencing population loss and physical decay leading to extreme fiscal problems. This will continue unless Federally financed intervention is made to alter this process. Ultimately, the nation must choose between two basic methods of accommodating future urban growth and improving the quality of life. One would require further suburban expansion including regional shifts to Sunbelt suburbs. The other would require slowing suburban expansion in order to create in-city housing demands on which the restoration of older cities can be built. The long-run shift of households and resources from the high-cost Northeast to the lower-cost Southwest will continue until cost structures are adjusted downward in the former and upward in the latter. (Author/WI)

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papers

on

POLITICS, POLICY, AND POLITICAL THEORY

THE FUTURE OF LARGE, OLDER AMERICAN CITIES TO THE YEAR 2000

by

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Anthony Downs lectured at Loyola University of Chicago on March 28th, 1977 on the topic of "The Future of Large, Older American Cities to the Year 2000." The invitation was extended to Anthony Downs under a Mellon Foundation Grant for support of the activities of the Center for Research in Urban Government (CRUG), Department of Political Science, Loyola University of Chicago.

THE FUTURE OF LARGE, OLDER AMERICAN CITIES TO THE YEAR 2000

I. Introduction

It is indeed challenging to consider what the future of American cities will be like to the year 2000. However, I have always disliked the term "cities" as it is so often used today. Technically, it covers every hamlet of more than 2,500 people, including all affluent and poor suburbs, as well as the major large and older central cities which Northeasterners think of when they hear that term. To reduce this ambiguity immediately, I am going to speak primarily about large, old central cities in the Northeast and Midwest, most of which contain sizeable minority-group populations--like Philadelphia.

II. Major Changes During the Past 24 Years

Let me begin by looking backwards the same 24-year timespan as 2000 is from today--to the year 1952. That will give us some idea of the degree of change likely to occur in such a timespan in our society.

The first thing that strikes me is the tremendous continuity of our society over the past 24 years. No really radical changes in our urban settlements have occurred. We are not commuting by rocket belts, or being served by robots, or living in earth satellites. Similar continuities will

persist in the next 24 years too.

On the other hand, in relation to cities as I have narrowly defined that term, some important changes have taken place since 1952. Moreover, some of them have become ongoing trends that are likely to continue into the near future, or beyond.

The rate of U.S. population growth changed quite remarkably in this period. It first rose very rapidly through a period of many births from about 1954 to 1964, and then fell even faster to our present very low fertility rates. The current trend is toward much slower overall population growth rates, even though we are in a period when large numbers of households are being formed each year.

A second major change since 1952 has been the dominance of urban growth by the suburban portions of metropolitan areas. The rapid spatial expansion of suburbs has been based upon a virtual explosion of automobile ownership and use, the building of major highway networks out of and around large cities, and high levels of suburban housing construction --most remarkably in the super-boom in real estate in the early 1970s up to 1973.

In 1952, there were about 54.6 million cars, trucks, and buses registered in the U.S. Today, there are 135 million such vehicles registered--a stupendous rise of 80 million vehicles while our total human population went up 57 million.

Moreover, the vehicle population is now rising about 5 to 6 million per year, as compared to the human population increase of about 1.5 million. If these two growth rates continue, by the year 2000 we will have a vehicle population of 279 million, 10 percent above today's, and a human population of 251 million--or 1.1 vehicles per person.

A key aspect of massive suburbanization of our population has been the inclusion in suburban growth of all types of activities, not just housing. Suburbs now contain every type of employment and service, from retailing through office space and industry to medical services and universities.

A third change since 1952 vital to large cities has been the loss of population and activity sustained by many such cities, as both shifted to suburban areas and--lately--outside metropolitan areas. From 1960 to 1970, 56 of the nation's 153 cities containing over 100,000 people lost population. But from 1970 to 1973, 87 of those cities lost population--including 26 out of the 28 in the Northeast, and 29 out of 41 in the North Central or Midwest region.

The people leaving these cities have been among the more affluent former residents. That has raised the proportion of relatively low-income and minority-group persons left in large cities, as compared to their suburbs. These losses of population have in some cases accompanied serious losses of economic functions, as major employment centers also

moved out of cities. Whole neighborhoods have become abandoned in some cities, losing large fractions of the population that resided there in 1952. The result has been a major fiscal squeeze on the budgets of big-city governments, as you know.

The magnitude of population losses in some large U.S. cities since 1950 is rather startling. From 1950 to 1973, St. Louis lost 35 percent of its total population; Cleveland lost 26 percent; Detroit lost 25 percent; and Pittsburgh lost 29 percent. Philadelphia lost only 10 percent--but that was 210,000 people.

A fourth major development since 1952 relevant to large cities has been the evolution of Federal urban-oriented programs. We went from a period of mainly suburban-construction-oriented programs (in the 1950s) through major emphasis upon urban-aid programs. Examples are urban renewal, the antipoverty program, the model cities program, and expensive subsidized housing aids. These were prominent in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Since then, we have shifted to what might be called a two-pronged Federal transfer-payment strategy. Instead of designing specific programs to aid cities, we give them money directly in the form of revenue sharing and indirectly by transfer aids to their residents through welfare, unemployment compensation, food stamps, and health programs.

III. Current and Future Trends and Background Factors

Now that I have looked back 24 years, let me turn to describing certain key background factors, forces, and relationships that are going to influence the future of cities in the next 24 years. Some of them are continuations of the trends I have just mentioned.

A. Lack of Housing Demand in Cities

First, the continued slowing of population growth in the nation, combined with more inter-regional migration away from the Northeast and Midwest to the Sunbelt, means that more and more entire metropolitan areas in the Northeast and Midwest will be experiencing very low total population growth or outright losses of population. This means further weakness in older neighborhoods and more housing abandonment, at least in the absence of any countervailing factors likely to raise housing demand there.

There are only two major possible sources of new demand for central-city housing under these conditions. One is small adult-oriented households, since children will be of decreasing importance in future household life. We are already seeing a rapid increase in the number of small households. They are more oriented towards in-city life than the child-oriented households which dominated past population growth.

The other major possible source of housing demand for central

cities could be a new wave of low-income immigrants--especially from Latin America. Such a wave is already entering many cities illegally. We will be facing a sharp drop in new entrants to the labor force around 1985; so we may even deliberately open up immigration to solve a future labor shortage. After all, housing abandonment is partly a result of the absence of any new inflow of poor migrants needing economic and social upgrading, since the flow of such immigrants from the Southern mechanization of agriculture stopped in the late 1960s.

This possible future shift would intensify slum housing conditions in our larger cities. It would not solve their housing problems through upgrading, but would put an end to abandonment. However, I doubt if we will do this deliberately, because the high wage levels of American labor are based upon a hidden foundation of preventing really large-scale inflows of cheap labor from abroad.

B. The Conflict Between Suburban Growth and City Restoration

The second key factor relevant to future city conditions is the conflict between continued suburban growth and expansion on the one hand, and the restoration or rebuilding of older central cities on the other hand. Clearly, the sine qua non of big-city population losses has been massive building of housing and other facilities in surrounding suburbs. These newer, more attractive facilities were located in neighborhoods free from poverty because of exclusionary zoning.

They have drawn millions of middle-income and upper-income households out of older cities. The more new housing and other facilities we crea e in suburbs in the future--as in the past--the more we will depopulate older city neighbor-hoods--especially causing them to lose people with good incomes.

Far from having a housing shortage, we built so many housing units in the early 1970s in most metropolitan-area suburbs that this accelerated the loss of people from big cities, as shown by the data cited earlier. Thus, there is a direct conflict between achieving high levels of new total housing production--as advocated by the building industry, academic housing experts, and construction unions--and the improving economic health of older central city governments. That health would be best served by an acute national housing shortage raising the demand for older housing units.

Many so-called urban experts believe our society needs strong and vital central cities in order to survive. I doubt it. If our central cities lose vitality, it may cause some change in our spiritual life--perhaps even a change for the worse. But it will hardly cause us to disappear or our civilization to end. The doughnut can live quite well without the hole being occupied with vital activities, in my opinion. It is already doing so in some areas.

Thus, the level of total national housing production will

have a crucial impact upon older cities in the future. The lower it is, the better for them, at least in terms of their economic and fiscal viability. Total housing production in turn depends mainly upon general economic conditions. Therefore, the general economic climate is the key to the strength of future housing demand in older cities. The greatest likelihood is for continued business cycles, which will contain sufficient periods of high-level or medium-level total new housing output to further weaken older cities. This will benefit consumers, however, since they clearly lose from the high prices typical of housing-shortage conditions.

Another facet of the suburban-central city conflict concerns political strength in the national Congress and state legislatures. As suburbs grow, they gain more such strength and are less and less likely to support programs of specific aid for older cities. This is clearly shown by the strong national hostility to New York City and its fiscal crisis. Hence I consider major programs of Federal aid for big-city restoration less and less likely to be adopted as time passes, unless they are parts of aid programs providing sizeable benefits to other areas too.

One possible political alliance helpful to older cities would be between their governments and suburban antigrowth advocates, who want to keep low-income residents out of suburban areas. If central cities allied with antigrowth suburbanites to slow down all suburban growth drastically, national housing

shortages would be created. They would strengthen housing demand in central-city neighborhoods and improve property values and tax bases there, although they would also harm poorer residents because of higher housing costs.

C. The Negative Triple Whammy

A third major factor influencing the future of large cities is what I will call the Triple Whammy of negative forces from which many such cities suffer. This trio of factors makes it extremely difficult to visualize any resurgence of dynamism in many of their neighborhoods where abandonment and decay have begun.

The first factor is racial segregation of housing markets. It leads to spatial concentration of low-income minority-group households in poverty-dominated central-city areas where housing is old and deteriorated. Middle-income persons of all races--especially whites--simply will not move into such areas, with the rare exception of young white households rehabilitating very well-located older neighborhoods. Because of both racial and economic segregation, the concentration of these low-income and minority-group households in older cities causes whites to withdraw elsewhere. Regardless of widespread mayoral rhetoric, those households cannot be lured back into such cities as long as poverty concentrations remain there. It is even possible that future minority-group dominance of downtown business districts--already true of retailing in many--may cause withdrawal of white office-work employers

from older city CBDs. This has already happened in Detroit and Newark and St. Louis to some degree.

Equally serious, a whole generation of dispossessed young blacks without proper family stability, school education, or employment opportunities is now growing up in large central cities. This group is responsible for a disproportionate share of crimes, vandalism, and insecurity in such cities. We simply do not know how to cope with them in ways that are either humanitarian or effective. Our major response so far is for all groups that can avoid them to withdraw somewhere else. Until the black community itself develops some internal control and discipline over this group, it is hard to see much improvement occurring. But how can the black community do that without money and with only low-level employment opportunities open to many of its members?

The second factor in the Triple Whammy is the obsolescence of the stock of housing, factory buildings, store buildings, streets, and other physical structures and improvements in central cities. They simply cannot compete with newer facilities in suburbs--or other regions--in attracting households and firms with money. Moreover, under the conditions of vandalism and labor-force difficulties common in large cities, rehabilitation is no cheaper than new building in suburban areas that contain far more attractive environments and amenities.

The third factor in the negative Triple Whammy is the high cost structure of both public-sector and private-sector operations in older cities. This results from the presence of strong unions--both public and private, very high levels of public services, high wages and fringe benefits, and the high tax-costs of dealing with dependent low-income populations. Economic entities that are cost-conscious--whether households or business firms--are driven to shift to other locations with lower costs, especially in the South and West. Costs are now lower there because union strength is far less, wages are lower, public services are less extensive, and welfare benefits are at very low levels.

D. Some Limitations of Public Policy

The last background factor I want to discuss concerns the limitations that affect our ability to intervene in, or change, ongoing trends through public policies. At least three such limitations are worth mentioning briefly.

One is our limited ability to manage complex governmental operations, especially those which require coordination of many different types of actions, such as housing, code enforcement, education, and criminal justice. Because the goals of public managers of social programs are far more diffuse and vague than those of profitmakers, we are simply incapable of coordinating any really complex social programs very effectively--as experience proves so clearly.

This is related to the second limitation--our unwillingness to enforce any type of social rules that require real discipline or harsh action, or cost much in terms of money. For example, our welfare agencies simply cannot enforce the rules of eligibility. Either the workers don't want to, or they are unable to. We are unwilling to cope with crime by jailing criminals for long periods because it would be too costly in terms of both building much bigger jails or restricting civil rights. Therefore, future solutions that require rigorous enforcement of rules won't work, unless we are more willing to change our permissive cultural attitudes than we have been until now.

The third limitation is that our elected officials will not confront the need to say "No" to any group, even under conditions of very limited resources. We have no true national growth policy because it would require Congress to indicate some areas should grow more than others--and it refuses to do that for political reasons.

All these limitations, and others, mean that many theoretically effective ways of attacking big-city problems cannot work in reality.

IV. The Future of U.S. Cities

Now that I have expounded at length about background factors, what can I say about the future of the large cities we are considering, between now and 2000? There are really two key

aspects of such future developments: residential and employment. Although they are closely related, I will focus mainly upon the residential, and then make just a few comments about the emplcyment aspect.

A. Possible Residential Futures

What future strategies could we adopt concerning large cities as places to live, in light of the factors already discussed? I have conducted a complex analysis of all the possible future combinations of five major residential policy variables. There are at least 32 such combinations, but I have narrowed down those possibilities to a mere eight alternative strategies. The five policy variables are the annual levels of (a) total national new housing production, (b) demolition of older units within cities, (c) relocation of households within cities, and (d) rehabilitation of older units within cities, and also (e) the location of new housing--either entirely in suburbs or partly in cities. I will not attempt to spell out the complexities of how I got down to only eight strategies, but I think they cover the reasonable possibilities rather thoroughly. These eight strategies and their relations to the above policy variables are shown in an accompanying table.

Only two of these eight alternative strategies are low-annual housing production strategies. They do not allow much movement of households out from central cities because not enough suburban housing is being created through new production. One of these is core obsolescence with a tight

FIVE KEY ELEMENTS OF ALTERNATIVE FUTURE RESIDENTIAL STRATEGIES

Alternative City Residential Strategies	Level of Total National Housing Production	Location of New Housing Units Built	Annual Level Within Large Older Cities of-		
			Housing Demolition	Household Relocation	Housing Rehabilitation
Core Obsolescence and a Tight Market	Low	Mainly in Suburbs	Low	Low	Low
Roll-over Rehabilitation	Low	Mainly in Suburbs	Low	Low	High
Core Clearance Only	High	Mainly in Suburbs	High	High	Low
Core Clearance Plus Rehabilitation	High	Mainly in Suburbs	High	High	High
Core Clearance Plus Rebuilding Only	High	In Both Cities and Suburbs	High	High	Low
Core Clearance Plus All-Out Renewal	High	In Both Cities and Suburbs	High	High	High
Residential Core Abandonment	High	Mainly in Suburbs	Low	High	Low
Residential Core	High	In Both Cities and Suburbs	Low	High	High

housing market, or what can be called slum preservation. It involves low housing production, mainly in the suburbs, with low demolition, rehabilitation, and relocation within cities. Little rehabilitation or demolition is carried out in cities because there is no place for the households who would be displaced by demolition or rehabilitation to move. Also, there is no public financial housing assistance for the poor, who cannot pay the higher cost of rehabilitated units without such assistance. Hence the poor can continue to be housed only if existing slums are neither torn down nor upgraded, but preserved as they are! Some cities embody this strategy now.

The second low-production alternative is like the first except that it involves high-level rehabilitation within older cities. But since there is no place to put the households displaced by rehabilitation during upgrading, all rehabilitation must be tightly administered in what I call a roll-over rehabilitation process. In it, people move out of one set of units to be rehabbed directly into another set where rehab has already been done. This requires both extremely complex administration and large-scale income subsidies to the poor so they can afford to live in rehabilitated housing.

Four other possible strategies involve high enough total housing production each year to allow major clearance of older units in core areas. Such new production is necessary

because core clearance involves the displacement of lots of households. The displaced households do not need to move directly into new suburban units, but enough new units must be built to loosen up the entire inventory so displacement can be accommodated somewhere. The core clearance alternatives vary concerning what is done in the cleared areas. It can be just clearance, leaving vacant space; or rehabilitation of non-cleared areas; or rebuilding of new housing in the cleared areas in wholly new environments (thus large-scale projects); or what I call all-out renewal--both new construction and rehabilitation.

The last two alternatives for city housing involve both high-level new projection and low-level demolition within the large cities themselves. One is residential core abandonment--just continuing the shift of population to new suburban units without any real improvement or clearance of abandoned areas. The other is residential core upgrading by inserting some new units into abandoned areas and doing major rehabilitation there too. This also needs major Federal subsidies.

B. Assessing the Alternatives

How do we assess which of these alternative strategies are desirable and which are likely to occur? Concerning desirability from the viewpoint of older cities themselves, those strategies that produce the greatest upgrading or rebuilding would be best. They are core-area clearance plus all-out

renewal, and residential core upgrading. Both of these strategies require high-level new housing production, major Federal housing aids, and some type of Federal program for long-term-development finance like urban renewal. Thus, it is clear that major Federal subsidies are needed for city renewal. Whether they will be politically attainable in a suburban-dominated Congress is a question others can answer as well as I can.

A crucial problem with any desirable strategy is: how can we restore strength of housing demand to older city neighborhoods--demand from households with adequate financial resources? I can see only four major methods: (1) clearing large enough areas to create wholly new environments attractive to middle-income households, (2) dispersing some of the poor from cities to suburban areas enough to dilute their negative impact upon middle-income demand within cities, (3) increasing the incomes of low-income households through subsidies of some kind so that they are no longer low-income, and (4) choking off new suburban growth enough to generate housing demand in cities because of a housing shortage. The second and fourth of these possibilities are politically difficult to attain--and the first and third are extremely expensive.

This does not mean there cannot be some successful rehabilitation in cities. It can occur in areas that have enough locational amenities to attract households with money into

spontaneous upgrading, as around Rittenhouse Square in Philadelphia. That can happen and is happening. But it hardly offsets the decline in other areas where no such amenities exist. Abandonment and decay continue there because people's basic incomes are not high enough to pay the high minimal cost of decent housing units.

C. The Most Likely Outcome

To put it bluntly, I believe the existing tendency of many large, older cities in the Northeast and Midwest to experience population losses and physical decay--leading to extreme fiscal problems--will continue unabated in the future unless some very significant Federally-financed intervention is made to alter this process. But our past experience with such interventions is not encouraging even when they are undertaken. They are usually not large-scale enough to stop the basic processes at which they are aimed, and they are too fragmented in administration to achieve the overall results desired.

Ultimately, we must choose as a nation between two basic methods of accommodating future urban growth and quality-of-life improvement. One is mainly through further suburban expansion--including regional shifts to Sunbelt suburbs. The other requires slowing suburban expansion in order to create in-city housing demands on which a restoration of our older cities can be built. But the restoration of older cities would require somehow mixing their present poor and

minority-group residents with middle-class whites. That could occur either by dispersing the poor out of central cities to make room for new middle-class environments there, or by having both groups live close together within the restored central cities.

In contrast, further suburban growth allows continued spatial segregation of housing by both income and race. I believe Americans will overwhelmingly prefer the latter pattern, and will politically oppose any major changes in it.

Furthermore, the shift of both households and business firms from high-cost, relatively obsolete older Northeastern and Midwestern cities and metropolitan areas to much lower-cost, more modern, newer Southern and Western cities is a desirable form of economic adjustment. It moves the nation towards a much more efficient long-run use of resources, however unpalatable that may be to Northeasterners and Midwesterners. Economic efficiency is certainly not the only goal of public policy. Nevertheless, in my opinion, it would be a serious mistake for the Federal government to provide sufficient fiscal subsidies to older, high-cost cities so they could fully escape the painful process of reducing the excessive wages and services they now provide. True, they deserve some national assistance to help them carry their disproportionate concentrations of poor households. But without strong regional competition from lower-cost urban areas elsewhere, they would never be willing to confront and adjust

their essentially non-viable accretions of overly-high public payrolls, wage levels, and public services. Ironically, the seemingly disproportionate flow of Federal spending to the South and West that these older cities complain about really represents responsibly efficient use of taxpayers' money by Federal officials. It is decidedly not just the dominance of major committees by Southern Senators and Congressmen. Thus, I believe the long-run shift of households and resources from the high-cost upper-right hand corner of the nation to the lower-cost bottom half and left hand edge will continue until regional cost structures are adjusted downward in the former and upward in the latter.

V. Conclusion

With all our blaring headlines concerning urban crises, and the well-publicized handwringing of so many big-city mayors and urban experts and columnists, it is easy to forget that the basic process of urban sprawl and development America has been using for the past three decades has been a huge success for the vast majority of our metropolitan-area households. That is true even though this process also generated massive problems in older inner-city areas. Why should people who have benefitted from this system, and do not suffer from its ills, change it--when they form the preponderant majority in our majority-oriented political system?

That is why I believe the basic tendency for most older cities

to lose population and suffer deterioration and fiscal difficulties will continue. We will keep on accommodating most upgrading through suburban and non-metropolitan growth, rather than restoration of older cities. Undoubtedly, there will be some new Federally financed efforts to aid in rehabilitation and city restoration. They may even be large-scale and expensive. But they will be far too small to stem the tide--even though they may cause "showcase" improvements in a few neighborhoods and cities.

I recognize that this discussion has greatly oversimplified the immense complexity and variability among communities relevant to the future of our cities to the year 2000. Moreover, I can perhaps be accused of fostering a self-fulfilling prophecy--though that criticism grossly over-estimates the influence of my views. True, I have not been overly optimistic about the future, because I have chosen to <u>forecast</u> what I think will actually happen--rather than <u>exhorting</u> people to behave in some desired way. But I have always tried to tell the truth as I see it about urban affairs. I hope my remarks can at least serve as a start for a fruitful discussion of the future of our older cities up to 2000.